

The French Revolution

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Experience teaches us that, generally speaking, the most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *France in Modern Times*
by Gordon Wright

The French Revolution was triggered not by one cause or event but by several. Ironically, many, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, argue that the various attempts to reform the ancien régime by Louis XV and Louis XVI led to its demise. When they failed, revolution swept France. Many blame Louis XIV, Louis XV, or Louis XVI, or all three for the outbreak of revolution. Louis XIV (reigned 1643-1715) weakened the nobility, but left them strong enough to thwart a weak king, and neither Louis XV (reigned 1715-74) nor Louis XVI (reigned 1774-92) were strong leaders. In the early eighteenth century, the nobility insisted on retaining or recovering their old rights and privileges, and they blocked the social advancement of those, for example, who wanted to become officers in the navy or army or to hold certain positions in the government. This resurgence of the nobility created more tensions in society and made it more difficult for the king to enact meaningful reform. In addition, Louis XIV bequeathed to his successors a nation mired in debt because of his ruinous engagement in several wars, the last of which, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-14), impoverished France.

Neither Louis XV nor Louis XVI strengthened the institution of kingship. During their reigns, France suffered numerous diplomatic and military defeats, which created disaffection at home and eroded the morale of both the army and navy, the support of which the monarch needed to retain his throne. Although Louis XV was greeted at the beginning of his reign as "the well beloved," by the end of his reign he was mocked as "the pleasure of ladies" because of his flamboyant mis-

resses, notably Madame de Pompadour and Madame Du Barry, who intervened in politics to advance the interests of their favorites. Only toward the end of his reign did Louis XV take a more active role in governance and become convinced of the need for reform. Frederick the Great's verdict of Louis XV, "his only defect was that of being king,"¹ was both damning and true.

His grandson and successor, Louis XVI, a well-intentioned and conscientious ruler, became conscious of the necessity of reform and brought in a variety of ministers, such as Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (see document 1, "Letter of Turgot to Louis XVI"), to enact such measures. But a phalanx of powerful enemies moved against Turgot, who was "just, but inflexible in his principles" and a man "whom no credit could bend or favour corrupt."² His expedients and those of others failed in part because of the strength of the opposition and the weakness of the king, who articulated at the outset of his reign that he wished "nothing so much as to be beloved."³ As one contemporary observed, "A well meaning man at Court is a foreign plant that a thousand insects set out to devour."⁴ The populace also unfairly derided Louis XVI as impotent and his wife, the Austrian-born Marie Antoinette, as extravagant and promiscuous. Although the queen was unfairly libeled, for she was a devoted wife and mother, it is true that she had done nothing to enhance the reputation of the king. Undoubtedly, Louis XVI faced a daunting task at a time when the institution of kingship was being challenged by intellectuals known as *philosophes*.

The *philosophes*, men such as François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, and Denis Diderot, challenged the basic institutions of the state, most notably the monarchy and the church, the pillars of the old regime. They used reason and criticism to attack existing inequities, such as unfair taxation, unjust laws, slavery, the evils of war, religious intolerance, bigotry, superstition. But in leveling such charges they eroded the prestige and power of the king and weakened his ability to bring about the very changes they advocated.

Economic conditions also played an important role in bringing about revolution. The government primarily relied on direct taxation, and neither the clergy nor the nobility paid this tax. Those who had the least paid the most, and those who had the most paid the least. This situation could not last for long—and it did not. France was on the verge of

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bankruptcy when Louis XVI came to the throne, and the situation only deteriorated during his reign. Because expenditure exceeded revenue, especially in wartime, the government had to use more and more of the revenue to service the debt. Because Louis XVI became convinced that only in peacetime could fundamental reform be enacted, he avoided commitment abroad, further eroding his prestige and ironically making it more difficult to enact reform. The increase in population, the European-wide recession, the growing unemployment, and the imbalance between the food supply and the population coalesced in 1788–89 when a drought in the spring, a hailstorm in the summer, and a bitterly cold winter devastated the crops and drove up the price of grain, the basic subsistence item, and caused rioting and then revolution.

It was in such an atmosphere that the king agreed to call the Estates General, a representative body that had not met since 1614, to deal with the endemic problems that France confronted. The Paris *parlement* (1 of 13 law courts throughout France), which was staffed by members of the nobility, decided that the estates should meet and vote as they had in the past—by estate: the first, the clergy; the second, the nobility; and the third, everyone else in France—and that each estate would have one vote. The members of the Third Estate, lawyers, merchants, artisans, and peasants, were furious with the *parlement*, which before this decision championed their rights against a despotic king—or so they thought. Individuals, such as Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, denounced the *parlement's* decision and championed the rights of the Third Estate in pamphlets such as *What Is the Third Estate?* In this tract, Sieyès argued that the Third Estate represented the nation and that "if the privileged order were removed, the nation would not be something less, but something more."⁵ Many urged the king to agree to the doubling of the Third Estate; that is, the Third Estate would have twice as many members as each of the other estates. At the insistence of his financial adviser Jacques Necker, the king agreed.

In the spring of 1789, elections were held to vote for the representatives to the Estates General. These elections varied throughout France, depending on local customs. The process was indirect in the case of the Third Estate and placed a premium on speaking ability. At this same time, *cahiers des doléances* (lists of grievances such as inequitable taxation) were also being drawn up. They provide a glimpse into the public opinion of various constituencies on the eve of the Rev-

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olution; they listed area concerns, complaints about abuses, and sometimes recommendations for change. But the king throughout the Revolution was led by events; he did not lead. When the Estates General convened on May 5, 1789, the king presented no reform program, and the members grew restive. The Third Estate wanted all the estates to meet as one and refused to act until the king agreed. The representatives of the Third Estate called on the other estates to meet with them as the National Assembly and refused to disband until they established a constitution for France. The king initially did nothing, perhaps paralyzed by grief over the death of his son. In the beginning, the king sided with the first two estates, but on June 27, 1789, the king wavered and finally ordered the members of the other estates to meet with the Third. Troops began to converge on Versailles, and on July 11 the king dismissed Necker, the symbol of reform.

The mustering of troops, the dismissal of Necker, the escalating price of wheat, fear of vagrants and the unemployed washed over the capital, and crowds started to arm themselves. On July 14, they went, seeking weapons, to the Bastille, a symbol of royal despotism because it was at one time both a prison and a fortress. The governor of the fortress finally agreed to let the mob in and ordered his troops not to fire. The mob, however, practicing no such restraint, murdered six soldiers, the governor, and the mayor of Paris and later paraded their heads on pikes. This was not the first time nor would it be the last that the mob played a decisive role. One contemporary, horrified by the bloodshed, condemned the murders and observed that "a cold-blooded cruelty was accounted virtue, and humanity was accounted weakness."⁶ The seizure of the Bastille, today marked by a national holiday in France, triggered the first of the great emigrations from France as the king's brothers, failing to convince the king to punish the rioters and suppress the Assembly, fled. It also marked the beginning of violence that would become endemic in the Revolution.

The king made yet another concession; he ordered all of the clergy and nobles who had not yet done so to meet with the Third Estate and dismissed the troops. Meanwhile, violence escalated both in Paris and in the countryside. Attempting to restore order, some nobles in the National Assembly on August 4-5 moved to abolish seigneurial rights, such as *corvée*, which is forced manual labor, gaming rights, and other

dues. The call for reform intensified. The Assembly also abolished tithes, the taxes collected by the church, and all exemptions from taxation and stipulated that all offices were open to anyone, to name but a few of the more important acts. These reforms dismayed the king, who, writing candidly to an archbishop, contended, "I will never consent to the spoliation of my clergy and my nobility."⁷ Faced with decrees that he could not condone, the king did nothing. But the passage of these decrees virtually ended disorder in the countryside. A few days later, on August 26, the Assembly issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. This fundamental document, influenced by the American Declaration of Independence, the cahiers, and the ideas of the *philosophes*, stressed man's natural rights, the rule of law, and freedom of thought and religion. (See document 4, "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.")

The economic situation, however, had not improved. The Flanders regiments were called into Versailles, and a banquet was held to celebrate their arrival. Rumors circulated that the white of the Bourbons and the black of the house of Austria were flaunted and the tri-color trampled. Agitators, such as Jean-Paul Marat and Camille Desmoulins, also spread stories that the king intended to disavow the work of the Assembly. As the tocsin rang out, crowds gathered in Paris. On October 5, a large crowd of women gathered around the Hôtel de Ville (city hall) demanding cheap bread and marched the 12 miles to Versailles. Both the king and the Assembly graciously received the women. The king, later that evening, accepted the Assembly's decree, yet another sign that the mob had dictated the resolution. Early the next morning, the mob stormed the palace, killed some of the bodyguards, paraded the bloody trophies on pikes, and surged up the steps toward the queen's apartments. Half dressed, the queen fled to the king. A contemporary observer, André-François, Comte Miot de Méliot, recoiled from the scene and recalled that at the time he was "dumb with horror."⁸ The regiments, in the meantime, had turned over their cartridges to the National Guard. Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, the commander of the National Guard, attempted to restore order and convinced the king to come to Paris. The Assembly followed shortly thereafter. Thus, the mobs had again captured the Revolution. In the succeeding days, disgusted by the violence

and disquieted by the idea of meeting in Paris, some members of the Assembly resigned and returned home; still more emigrated. The king had become a prisoner of Paris and increasingly was to realize it.

The most important legislation of the Revolution was passed in the period after the autumn of 1789. It was at this time that political clubs, such as the Jacobins, started to form. The Jacobins were members of a group who called themselves the Society of Friends of the Constitution. They were dubbed Jacobins because they usually met in the buildings formerly occupied by the Jacobin order. In the fall of 1791, there were over 1,000 such clubs scattered throughout France, but their number mushroomed to approximately 2,000 during the radical phase of the Revolution. This large network of affiliated societies and its active membership enabled the Jacobins to wield enormous power. As the membership, initially limited to the upper middle class, was opened to the poorer elements, the society became more radical. By 1793, the Jacobins fell under the influence of the Mountain. This group of left-wing deputies, so called because they sat high up on the left of the Convention, was estimated to include between 258 and 302 members. It most famously included Maximilien Marie Isidore Robespierre,⁷ George Jacques Danton, and Jean Paul Marat.

Those who wanted a stronger role for the king lost on pivotal issues: the king received a suspensive, not an absolute, veto; the Assembly voted for a unicameral, not a bicameral, legislature. Even more distressing from the king's point of view was the confiscation of church land. This church land was to be sold and the bonds, the assignats, were to be used to pay down the debt. Shortly thereafter, the Assembly passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (July 12, 1790), which reorganized the church. The new diocesan boundaries corresponded to the departments, with one bishop for each department, a reduction from 130 to 83 bishoprics. In addition, the civil constitution treated all officials of the church as officials of the state and paid them on a graduated scale, provided that all officials be chosen by local election, and demanded that all clergy take an oath of loyalty to the state. This legislation, probably one of the most ill-conceived of the Revolution because it fueled Catholic resistance, further disenchanted the king with the Revolution and created a schism in French society. As one observer notes about this legislation, it "cut all the bridges."⁹ Only 7 of the 138 bishops agreed to take the oath (see document 7, "Memoirs of the

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Duchess of Tourzel on the Oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy," and document 8, "Letter of the Archbishop of Embrun"). Of the parish priests throughout France, about half took the oath. Of those who took the oath, many retracted it (see document 9, "Declaration of Guillaume Tolleit") when the pope denounced the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in the spring of 1791 and threatened all those who did not retract the oath within 40 days with excommunication. The regions with the highest percentage of refractory clergy—also called nonjuring clergy, that is, those who had not taken the oath—tended to be rural and to have native-born priests.

The Revolution had created two churches, one official and one clandestine. In so doing, it had alienated many irrevocably. In setting state against church, Paris against Rome, the Assembly unwittingly forged the leaders and troops of the counterrevolution. The schism in the clergy lasted until 1801, when Napoleon Bonaparte signed the Concordat with the papacy. That agreement bound church and state even more tightly together. Even then some on both sides refused to accept it. Many Catholics, including the king, took the sacraments from the refractory clergy. The National Assembly at this time also tried to eliminate many of the institutions of the old regime—the provinces, the *parlements*, local laws—and to replace them with departments, uniform municipal organizations, and uniform laws.

As the king's disenchantment with the Revolution grew, so did his sense of being a prisoner. In the spring of 1791, when the royal family attempted to go to the countryside to celebrate Easter as they did traditionally, the National Guard refused to let them leave Paris. The realization that they were in fact prisoners combined with the growing and hostile demonstrations of the crowd outside the Tuileries persuaded the king and his family to flee the capital. They did so on June 20, 1791. Unfortunately, the king left behind a note condemning the Revolution (see document 10, "Letter of Louis XVI"), and the escape was bungled. The royal family was brought ignominiously back to the capital. The flight forced the Constituent Assembly to recognize an inescapable fact: the king had not accepted the Revolution. Nonetheless, when the constitution was presented to the king, he signed it, and the Constituent Assembly ended and the new Legislative Assembly convened. A constitutional monarchy had been established that would last less than a year.

War proved to be the crisis that helped to end the constitutional monarchy. Other European powers had refused up to this time to intervene in the Revolution because many hoped that the Revolution would weaken France internally and prevent the French from becoming the aggressors they had been in the seventeenth century. Still other powers were more concerned with other international issues, such as the partition of Poland. But the émigrés kept clamoring for intervention, and those who feared the spread of the Revolution abroad, such as Edmund Burke, became more vocal. On July 6, 1791, the emperor Leopold II issued the Padua Circular in which he urged other European sovereigns to act in concert and "limit the dangerous extremes of the French revolution."¹⁰ The French only gave credence to their enemies' fears: they annexed papal territory inside France, Avignon and Venaissin, and violated international treaties. The dominant political group in the Assembly, the Girondins, or the Brissotins, so called because many came from an area called the Gironde or were followers of Jacques Pierre Brissot, became the war party. These left-wing deputies, numbering approximately 130, relied on the considerable oratorical talents of their members, which included Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. The king favored war because he expected that disaster would ensue; that is, the army would fall apart and the nation would rally around him. The Girondins favored war because they thought victory would be assured, foreigners would flock to the Revolution, and only then would the Revolution be secured. In the Declaration of Pillnitz of August 1791, Leopold II of Austria threatened to invade France to reestablish order if the other European powers would join him. Although the infamous "if" clause in effect made this an empty gesture, the declaration only added to the war hysteria. Some, such as Robespierre, argued—but futilely—that no one loves "armed missionaries."¹¹ In April 1792, the French declared war on Austria. Shortly thereafter, Prussia joined with Austria. Disaster soon followed for France. By the summer, both Austria and Prussia were on the verge of invading France. This advantage prompted them to issue the Brunswick Manifesto (July 25), which threatened Paris with retribution if anything happened to the king or queen. Instead of ameliorating the situation of the royal family this declaration exacerbated it and confirmed the suspicions many harbored of the king's betrayal of the Revolution.

As many had predicted, the French suffered serious losses in initial clashes with the enemy. Many of the officers had either emigrated or resigned and the troops lacked discipline—sometimes murdering their own commanders. Because of these disasters the reputations of those, such as Robespierre who had opposed the declaration of war, increased and the suspicions of the court—particularly of the king and the Austrian-born queen—increased. In France, meanwhile, conditions had deteriorated: the paper money, the assignat, steadily lost value; prices climbed; and scarcities of vital items escalated. Recruits streamed into Paris; those from Marseilles chanted a new, bellicose song that would later become the national anthem, the *Marseillaise*. Demagogues such as Marat, Robespierre, and Danton whipped up revolutionary hysteria and submitted petitions to the Assembly urging the dethronement of the king.

It was in such an atmosphere that the "second revolution" took place: a mob invaded the Tuileries, massacring 600 of the Swiss Guard, who protected an empty palace because the royal family had fled to the Assembly for protection. Mobs again determined the path of the Revolution. The Assembly voted to suspend the king and establish a new republican constitution. But mob violence was not yet over. After Lafayette defected to the Austrians and as the Prussian troops advanced, capturing Verdun, the last fortress defending the road to Paris, mobs, acting on ill-founded rumors that counterrevolutionaries were cooperating with the enemy, massacred over 1,300 defenseless men, women, and children imprisoned mainly in Paris in what has come to be called the September Massacres. (See document 12, "Journal of Jourgniac de Saint-Meard.")

Shortly thereafter, the French took the offensive. French troops repulsed the allies at Valmy (September 30), stopping the Prussian advance on Paris, and invaded the Austrian Netherlands, the Left Bank of the Rhine, and Savoy. It was in celebration of such victories and the certitude of more to come that the French issued the "propaganda decrees" (see document 26, "The First Propaganda Decree, November 20, 1792," and document 27, "The Second Propaganda Decree, December 15, 1792"), which offered fraternity and aid to all people who wished to recover their liberty, and which confirmed the fears of many, such as Edmund Burke (see document 32, "Edmund Burke's Condem-

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nation"), that the French intended to export their revolution. Burke and others also worried about the fate of the king.

Those who wanted the establishment of a republic, such as Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, argued that the king should not be tried, that he should be executed because kingship itself was a crime. "One cannot reign innocently," Saint-Just contended.¹² The discovery of a hidden cache of the king's letters denouncing the Revolution and requesting foreign aid decided the king's fate. Although the well-respected lawyer Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes and two others came forward courageously to defend the king, the issue was never in doubt. By a wide margin, the king was found guilty of treason and condemned to death. Louis XVI was executed in January 1793. His wife's execution followed within less than a year. Of the regicides, those who voted for the death of the king, 34 died under the "national razor" (the guillotine), 21 died by violence, 28 expired naturally, and 127 later served under Napoleon.¹³ The execution of the king combined with the issuance of the propaganda decrees and the increased violations of international law provoked Britain, the United Provinces, and Spain to join Austria, Prussia, and Sardinia in the War of the First Coalition (1792-95) against France.

As the allies drove the French from the Austrian Netherlands and the Rhineland and prepared to invade France, and yet another celebrated French general, Charles-François du Périer Dumouriez, defected to the allies (April 1793), the French government responded to the crisis by conscripting men into the army, provoking resistance and shortly thereafter counterrevolution in an area called the Vendée. France found herself at war within and without her borders. The assignat plunged in value and scarcities of critical items increased. In the Convention, the Girondins, the group who had argued for a national referendum on the fate of the king, opposed giving in to the demands of the Parisian crowds invaded the Tuileries and threatened the Assembly. They advocated a diminution of the role of the capital and pushed for an extension of the war, but found their fate at issue.

On May 31, 1793, approximately 80,000 Parisian *sans-culottes*, so called because they did not wear the culottes of the aristocracy, invaded the Convention. With cannon primed and pointed at the chamber, they demanded the expulsion and arrest of the Girondins. Mobs again determined the fate of the Revolution. As historian Simon Schama has

pointed out, what was abandoned was "the last scrap of pretense that the revolution was founded on legality and indeed on representation."¹⁴ Some Girondins escaped and fled to the provinces; these "federalist" rebels would later demand a more decentralized revolution. Revolts broke out in Marseilles, Bordeaux, and Lyons, and the great port of Toulon was handed over to the British. The champion of the *sans-culottes*, the journalist Jean-Paul Marat, was murdered in his bath. The Mountain concurred with the demands of the *sans-culottes* and assumed more power. Their opposition to the group led by Brissot and their support for the Terror defined them. During the king's trial, they voted against the referendum and for the king's death. Moreover, they shared the dangerous conviction that "liberty must conquer at all costs,"¹⁵ or, in the words of Robespierre, "to despair is equivalent to treason."¹⁶ Inherent in that view was an absolutism far more terrifying than that of the monarchy.

Once the Mountain dominated the Convention, they assumed control of the pivotal Committee of Public Safety, which itself assumed more power during the Terror. The Terror began in the summer of 1793 and lasted through the summer of 1794. During that period, more than 40,000 were executed. More than 400,000 died in the civil war that wracked France. Many in the Convention thought that the republic was beleaguered from within as well as without. To combat the invasion of the allies, the Convention decreed the *levée en masse* (August 23, 1793), calling on the entire population to aid in the war effort (see document 25, "Decree of August 23, 1793, the *Levée en masse*"). In the words of one revolutionary, "Every citizen should be a soldier and every soldier should be a citizen."¹⁷ On September 5, 1793 "terror" was proclaimed the "order of the day."¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, the Convention passed the Law of Suspects (September 17, 1793) which stipulated in very vague terms that anyone even suspected of disloyalty could be arrested (see document #15, "The Law of Suspects"). On October 10 the constitution was suspended and France was declared to be "revolutionary until the peace."¹⁹ The Convention also passed three decrees called the Maximum (May 4, 1793, September 29, 1793, and February 24, 1794) that set prices on necessities, such as grain, flour, butter, oil, brandy, coal, candles, salt, and tobacco, and regulated wages. They also requisitioned goods for the war effort, executed many generals for failing to act aggressively enough, and resorted to mass executions in the provinces

to suppress federalist revolts or counterrevolutionary uprisings. Many agreed with the assessment of Saint-Just that "prosperity can not be hoped for while the last enemy of liberty still breathes."²⁰

The spirit of that sentiment was incarnated in the Law of 22 Prairial (June 10, 1794), which marked the beginning of the Great Terror, or "the Republic of Virtue." This law accelerated the judicial processes of the Terror by, in effect, depriving the accused of any defense and requiring little evidence to convict. During that period of 7 weeks more people were condemned to death than in the preceding 14 months, although ironically both the internal and external threats were no longer significant.

Opposition developed on both the left and the right. On the left, the followers of Jacques Hébert, a spokesman for the *sans-culottes* who advocated more radical economic reforms and espoused atheism, threatened the Mountain because of their support in Paris. On the right, the *Dantonistes*, or Indulgents, challenged the continuance of the Terror by pointing out that both the external danger from France's enemies abroad and the internal threat from counterrevolutionaries and federalists had been checked. Both the *Hébertistes* and the Indulgents ultimately met the same fate: death on the guillotine.

When the Committee of Public Safety failed to answer all of its critics, when many became convinced that the Terror was no longer necessary, and when many feared that they too would be targeted, the fate of Robespierre and his colleagues was decided. Ironically, the very success of the Terror ensured its demise. In the revolutionary month of Thermidor, Robespierre and his colleagues, notably Saint-Just and Georges Couthon, were arrested. Although Robespierre's followers secured their release, they were soon rearrested and promptly executed. Of the 12 members of the Committee of Public Safety, 3 were executed and 3 sentenced to deportation. William Wordsworth, an early, but subsequently disenchanted, admirer of the Revolution, would condemn the "heinous appetites"²¹ of the terrorists and write evocatively of the Terror and the "domestic carnage [that] now fill'd all the year":

The Old Man from the chimney nook,
The Maiden from the bosom of her Love,
The Mother from the Cradle of her Babe,
The Warrior from the Field, all perish'd, all
Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks,

Head after head, and never heads enough
For those who bade them fall.²²

The Thermidoreans, who governed from 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794) until the installation of the Directory in October 1795, dismantled the machinery of the Terror. They repealed the Law of 22 Prairial, suppressed the Revolutionary Tribunal, freed thousands of prisoners, closed the Jacobin clubs, and weakened the power of the Parisian commune (which had supported Robespierre), the Committee of Public Safety, and the representatives on mission (those dispatched to the army or to the departments to enforce the will of the Convention). During this time, those who had indulged in some of the worst atrocities, such as Jean-Baptiste Carrier (see document 19, "Letter of Carrier"), who had conducted "republican baptisms" (mass executions by drowning), and over 70 others died under the national razor. The government offered an amnesty to those in the Vendée, which temporarily brought peace to that region (see document 20, "Proclamation of the Royalists in the West," and document 21, "Charette's Declaration, February 17, 1795"). But revolt broke out again in 1796, 1813, and 1815.

After the government dismantled the economic controls in December 1794, thus sparking and fueling inflation, the assignat plunged in value, forcing many to pay their taxes in kind rather than in currency. Although in 1795 the Directory stipulated that no more assignats would be issued, by 1796 the assignat was worth 0.025 percent of its original value. In 1797, the assignats were formally demonetized. The inflation of this currency ruined creditors, devastated wage earners and those on fixed incomes, and undermined confidence in the economy.

Twice in the spring of 1795, 12 Germinal (April 1) and 2 Prairial (May 21), the crowd again tried to play a role in the Revolution. In Prairial, they invaded the Convention, beheading a deputy who tried to stop them, and surrounded the hall with cannons. On this occasion, however, the Convention called in the National Guard and arrested the militants. In both instances military force was used against the crowd. Never again did the *sans-culottes* rise and change the path of this Revolution. A general revulsion toward Robespierre and the Terror and all that that implied swept over France. As one historian notes, "The pursuit of plea-

sure replaced the republic of virtue."²³ Contemporaries often commented on the immorality that seemed endemic in France after Thermidor. For a British traveler, "the depravity of all ranks . . ." was "past belief."²⁴

The Thermidoreans also perceived the necessity of drawing up yet another constitution for France with elaborate checks and balances, including annual elections and a five-man directorate. Each year one of the five would be replaced. To avoid threats from both the left and the right, the two elected bodies, the Council of Ancients and the Council of Five Hundred, were to include at least two-thirds of the members of the existing government. At this time, too, peace was concluded with Prussia (April 1795), the United Provinces (May 1795), and Spain (July 1795). Only Austria, Sardinia, and Great Britain remained at war with France under the Directory.

The Directory was a government obsessed with war and with staying in power. The French, under able generals such as Jean Victor Moreau, Jean Baptiste Jourdan, and Napoleon Bonaparte, took the offensive in the German and Italian lands, forcing Sardinia (1796) and Austria (1797) out of the war. The British continued fighting. They retained naval superiority because of the able leadership of such officers as Samuel Hood, Richard Howe, John Jervis, and Horatio Nelson, and they won strategic victories, such as Aboukir Bay (1798), which marked British naval supremacy and which incidentally stranded Napoleon and his troops in Egypt. Back in Europe, the French invasion of Italy and Switzerland and the creation of the satellite republics meant war yet again and the formation of the Second Coalition with Russia, Austria, Great Britain, Turkey, Portugal, and Naples (1799).

Both those on the left and those on the right, dissatisfied with the Directory, assailed it for being corrupt and self-seeking. The royalists, hoping for free elections, staged a mass protest in the capital in Vendémiaire (October 5, 1795), but they were quelled by the army under the orders of an aggressive commander, Napoleon Bonaparte. It was only then, as historian I. C. W. Blanning points out, that the deputies were able to escape "from the thrall of the revolutionary crowd."²⁵ The next threat came from the left under François-Noël Babeuf, a journalist who frequently had been imprisoned for advocating more radical reforms. He called himself Gracchus Babeuf after the famous brothers of ancient Rome who advocated, among other things,

distribution of land to the landless. In 1796, he, together with disenchanted Jacobins, planned an uprising called the Conspiracy of Equals. The government, apprised of the plot, arrested them and executed two, including Babeuf. In the 1797 (Fruktidor) elections, those on the right won, but three of the directors, faced with a royalist majority and the possibility of peace, nullified 49 elections and purged 177 of those legally elected with the assistance of the military. The elections of 1798 (Floréal) and 1799 (Germinal) also were "adjusted."

The Directory, increasingly under attack and ridiculed for its greed, corruption, and tenacious insistence on staying in power, came to rely more on the army. Yet, at the same time, it came to fear a young general whose reputation had been earned during the revolutionary wars: Napoleon, whom one contemporary referred to as "that wild-haired little runt." It was Napoleon to whom Sieyès turned when he realized that the government under the Directory was neither workable nor supportable. As Sieyès put it, what France most needed was "authority from above and confidence from below."²⁶

On 18 Brumaire (November 1799) in another coup, Napoleon became first consul and then later emperor (1804). In 1799, Napoleon called on all Frenchmen to recognize a new reality: "Citizens, the Revolution is established on the principles on which it began. It is over."²⁷ And so it was. After numerous years of warfare and privation and the loss of many fellow citizens, the French found themselves under a government more despotic than the monarchy they had overthrown. This is but one of many ironies of the French Revolution.

Notes

1. I. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 21.
2. Jean François Marmontel, *Memoirs of Marmontel* (London: H. S. Nichols, 1895), 2:148-50.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:288.
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20. *Ibid.*
21. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, 1805 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), line 339.
22. *Ibid.*, lines 329–36.
23. Sydenham, *The French Revolution*, 231.
24. *Ibid.*
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CRISES OF THE ANCIEN RÉGIME

Man was born free and everywhere is in chains.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

Many events triggered the outbreak of that complex event, the French Revolution. Some historians, such as Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, blame the *philosophes* (intellectuals who in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were concerned with the basic problems of the day) because they used criticism and reason to undermine the very foundations of the ancien régime and to advocate freedom, whether from arbitrary power or unjust laws. These *philosophes*, who stressed individuals' rights rather than their duties, came from different social classes: Montesquieu was a member of the nobility; Voltaire, the middle class; and Rousseau, the lower class. Although the Enlightenment was centered in France, it was not exclusively a French phenomenon. *Philosophes* could be found in many countries: John Locke was English; Adam Smith and David Hume, Scottish; Cesare Beccaria, Italian; Montesquieu, Diderot, and Voltaire, French; Rousseau, Swiss; and Immanuel Kant, German. They critiqued existing injustices but often differed on the solution and fought among themselves, prompting historian Peter Gay to compare them to a stormy family.¹ Carl Becker also compared the *philosophes*—but to medieval theologians. Just as theologians in the Middle Ages were trying to construct a heavenly city in the hereafter using faith, in the eighteenth century *philosophes* were using reason to construct a heavenly city on earth. The *philosophes* attacked the authority of the church and the Bible, but they believed in the authority of reason.²

They also believed in the importance of education. The project advanced by Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert to assemble an *encyclopédie* symbolized the Enlightenment spirit: to spread knowledge and to encourage a critical evaluation of society and its institutions.

The *philosophes* attacked a variety of abuses. John Locke, Pierre Bayle, and Voltaire, for example, undermined the position of the church by advocating religious toleration. Locke also propagated the idea that man had natural rights and that government was formed to protect those rights, the contractual theory of government. Should the government fail to do so, man had the right to rebel. This philosophy proved a potent rationale for revolution. Other *philosophes*, notably Rousseau and Montesquieu, attacked corrupt governments but did not agree on the remedy. Montesquieu argued that climate, the size of the country, customs, and so forth influenced the type of government. A large tropical country needed a despotic government. A small country in a northern climate was best suited to a republic. In a medium-sized country, such as France, with a moderate climate, the best government was a mixed government, a monarchy whose power was restricted by various corporate bodies. In particular, the nobility were important because they could prevent a monarchy from becoming a despotism. Rousseau argued that man's defects were given him by society; institutions had corrupted man. "Man was born free and everywhere is in chains."³ The general will, which incarnated the will of the community, a hazy concept at best, should govern society. Other *philosophes* attacked superstition, slavery, unfair laws, and taxes. Some, such as Voltaire, attacked optimism because such a philosophy implied acceptance of the status quo and precluded any change. Over time the *philosophes* became more radical. For example, at the end of the seventeenth century, Locke and Bayle argued for limited toleration of others' religions; but by the late eighteenth century, Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, was contending that there was no God. These ideas helped to undermine the legitimacy of the old regime. To philosophize, as one contemporary noted, was "to shake off the yoke of authority."⁴

Some historians, however, stress the importance of economic issues. They point, for example, to the great increase in population in the eighteenth century and the ensuing dislocation, especially in France. In 1700, there were approximately 19 million French people, and by 1789, there were 24 million. The population increased in part

because more scientific farming and animal-breeding methods were employed and new crops, such as the potato and the turnip, were introduced, which provided people in the eighteenth century with a better diet than their predecessors. The death rate declined for many reasons: the recession of various diseases, such as the plague; medical advances; and the growing philanthropic spirit, which translated into better care of the ill and the poor.

The growth of the population also meant that there was an imbalance between the population and the food supply. More people survived but on a marginal level. Approximately 30 percent of the population lived in poverty. The gap between the rich and the poor was not lessening but growing. Some historians emphasize the direct link between the high price of bread and the outbreak of revolts. For example, in 1774, when the harvest was poor, bread prices rose more than 50 percent and ignited what has been called the "Flour War"; that is, riots in Paris and northeastern France. In the late 1780s, bread prices increased because of a series of natural disasters. In 1788, a drought in the spring, a hailstorm in the summer, and a bitterly cold winter devastated crops. All these natural disasters drove up the price of grain, which peaked on July 14, 1789, the day the Bastille fell. In a century, the price of goods rose 62 percent, but wages did not.⁵ In addition unemployment also spiked upward because of the European-wide recession from 1785 to 1788.

The fundamental fiscal problem in France was structural. The government primarily relied on direct taxation, the *taille*, for financing. But neither the clergy, who owned about 10 percent of the land, nor the nobility, who owned between 25 and 30 percent, paid this tax. The clergy, who ran the hospitals, schools, and orphanages and kept the local records of births, marriages, and deaths, collected the tithe, in theory one-tenth of an individual's income. They did present the king with a "free gift," but they determined the amount. To compound the problem, in many areas tax farmers collected the taxes and forwarded only part of that money to the government. What precipitated the Revolution more than anything else was the fiscal crisis. Expenditure exceeded revenue, especially in wartime. Throughout the eighteenth century, France was involved in many wars, most notably the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48) and the Seven Years' War (1756–63), which helped to bankrupt the state. The French devoted about 25 percent of

the budget to the army and navy and about 50 percent to pay off the debt.⁶ The various finance ministers, who had no central bank to turn to, relied on a variety of expedients to stave off disaster, such as loans, but to no avail. The creaky edifice known as the ancien régime finally collapsed.

Socially, the most fundamental paradox in the ancien régime was the king, who claimed a monopoly on all legitimate power. The king was thus both the defender of privilege and at the same time the fountainhead of justice; that is, the source of reform. This role would have challenged the most talented and resourceful of kings, and neither Louis XV nor his grandson Louis XVI were either. The Second Estate, the nobility, most directly contested the king's power. Although Louis XIV had undermined the power of the nobility, they nonetheless remained strong enough to challenge his successors. After the death of Louis XIV (1715), the nobles increasingly assumed more power, a phenomenon called the resurgence of the nobility. The nobles claimed a variety of privileges, such as trial in special courts and execution by decapitation rather than by hanging. They could not be conscripted into the army nor could troops be billeted in their households. Only nobles could hold the most prestigious offices in the realm, whether it be bishop or minister or ambassador or general officer in the army or navy. In effect, the old order made it impossible for talented men who were not members of the nobility to achieve high office. Even more dangerous, the nobles of the sword, the older, more prestigious nobility, and the nobles of the robe, the officeholders, started to intermarry and join forces against the king. It was the nobility who acted as judges of the 13 *parlements* (law courts) that registered the edicts of the king. Thus, the nobles were able to block the king's reforms. Some historians allege that the Revolution started long before the seizure of the Bastille in July 1789. They argue that the first stage of the Revolution was the struggle between the king and the nobility.

Both Louis XV (reigned 1715–74) and Louis XVI (reigned 1774–92) realized that reform was essential. Unfortunately, both kings damaged the image of monarchy at a time when the old rationalization for the king's rule, divine right (the belief that the king was appointed by and answerable only to God), was being contested. Louis XV was both lazy and pleasure loving. In particular, he loved women and supported a number of mistresses, the most famous of which was Jeanne

Antoinette Poisson Le Normant d'Étioles, Marquise de Pompadour. During his reign, a number of favorites dominated the court and a number of ruinous wars drained the treasury. But Louis XV became increasingly committed to reform as France tottered on the edge of bankruptcy. When Madame de Pompadour's funeral cortege passed by, he allegedly said: she picked a good time to take a journey. He also is attributed incorrectly with the remark, "*Après moi, le déluge*" (After me, the deluge). In 1745, he appointed Jean Baptiste de Machault d'Arnouville controller general of finances. Machault persuaded the king that France could be saved only by the imposition of a new tax, the *vingtième* (the twentieth), which would replace the old taxes. This tax that would be levied on all Frenchmen directly attacked the exemption of the nobles and the church. Because of stiff resistance, this plan was eventually abandoned, but the king increasingly reasserted his right to govern, arguing that he alone held power in the state. Eventually, Louis XV realized that the only way to enact reform was to abolish the old *parlements*, establish new ones, and eliminate the sale of judicial offices. This reform, the "*Maupeou parlements*," however, lasted less than three years (1771–74).

When Louis XVI came to the throne in 1774, he wanted to be loved by his people and immediately dismissed the *Maupeou parlements* and recalled the old ones. Some historians contend that from this time onward revolution was inevitable. Louis XVI, too, attempted numerous reforms; he appointed a number of controllers general of finance dedicated to eliminating abuses. In 1774, he appointed Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, a former intendant (agent of the king) in Limoges who was noted for his many reforms, notably the introduction of new crops, the development of industry, and the abolition of compulsory labor (*corvée*) for public projects. In the Six Edicts, Turgot attacked many of the privileged groups in France (see document 1, "Letter of Turgot to Louis XVI"). He advocated the abolition, for example, of most guilds, *corvée*, and the tariffs levied on grain and proposed the establishment of a new tax on landowners. The *parlements* defended the privileged and opposed Turgot. Turgot, however, was both tactless and politically inept. He was determined to push his reforms through no matter what the cost, and he imprisoned many of his opponents in the Bastille. On being advised to be patient and put through his reforms slowly he replied, "In our family we die at fifty."⁷ He paid for his haste.

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He soon lost the support of other ministers and the queen and was dismissed by the king. However, his assessment that only significant reform could avert revolution proved accurate. His other prediction of his own demise was fairly accurate as well: he died at age 54. Turgot's dismissal, in the words of an eminent historian, showed the "impossibility of overcoming entrenched privilege."⁸

The king then turned to a number of other ministers to resolve the fiscal crisis: Jacques Necker, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, and Etienne Charles Loménie de Brienne. Necker served as director of the treasury in 1776 and then director general of finances starting in 1777. His opposition to free trade in grain had made him enormously popular. The king, however, refused to name him controller general because he was a Protestant and a commoner. Necker, who was an international financier, hoped to restore financial confidence by reducing expenses and borrowing at high interest rates. He also conducted a survey of all venal offices (offices that were bought and sold and regarded as property) with the hope of abolishing them. His publication of the *Compte Rendu* in 1781 revealed a modest surplus in the king's accounts but did not detail the loss in the extraordinary accounts that funded the military debt. His image as financial savior survived intact, but his attempt to increase his power and gain admittance to the council backfired. When the king refused his demand for even more stringent reforms, he resigned in 1781.

The next significant reform effort came with the appointment of Calonne, who served as controller general from 1783 to 1787. In his words, "All the funds were empty . . . [the] alarm was general and confidence destroyed."⁹ Like Turgot, he too had been an intendant, but, unlike both Turgot and Necker, he realized that economizing would not solve the fundamental economic problem. Instead, he adopted a spending policy to restore confidence in the government. The recession that gripped Europe at the end of the eighteenth century doomed that effort. Calonne rejected the idea of printing more money, fueling inflation and thus lowering the costs of the loans, and refused to repudiate the kingdom's debts. The only solution was to institute a new tax on land to be levied on all, even the privileged. To garner support for this fundamental reform, Calonne urged the king to call an Assembly of Notables, the most eminent men in the nation. Unfortunately, many of Calonne's ene-

mies and Necker's supporters were in the Assembly, and they refused to authorize any fundamental reform. The king accordingly dismissed Calonne, who fled to Great Britain not to return to France until 1802. He was the first of many who sought safety abroad.

The king turned next to Brienne, Calonne's main adversary in the Assembly. Brienne fared little better with the Assembly, and the king had to resort to various expedients to raise money, including forcing laws through the reluctant *parlements*. Brienne's attempts to save France from bankruptcy also failed. The ancien régime simply collapsed. The king had no choice but to call the Estates General, the representative body of France that had not met since 1614.

Louis XVI was neither capable enough nor imaginative enough to deal with this new situation. He was both conscientious and well intentioned but also "hopelessly irresolute"¹⁰ as well as politically inept. He did not direct events; events drove him. He was an extremely private man whose great passions were eating and hunting. His failure to sire a child after almost eight years of marriage was ridiculed widely. His wife, Marie Antoinette, also gravely impaired the reputation of the monarchy. She was tactless, frivolous, extravagant, and poorly advised. She also was unpopular because she was from Austria, France's traditional enemy, and seemed to many to advance the interests of her homeland rather than those of France. The Diamond Necklace Affair, in which a credulous churchman thought that he was buying an expensive bauble for the queen, unjustly implicated the queen, who was notorious for her extravagance, even though she knew nothing of the swindle. Both Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette did little to narrow the widening gulf between the court and the people. It was not hatred that the people felt for the monarchy but contempt, and as Goethe once astutely remarked, it was not hatred but contempt that destroys a regime.¹¹

Because the king's primary duty and exclusive prerogative was to defend the kingdom, the disasters that befell France militarily and diplomatically were blamed on him. In the eighteenth century, the French army oftentimes was humilitatingly defeated just as they were at Rossbach in 1757 by the greatly outnumbered Prussians. The diplomatic picture was no better. France's participation in the War of the Polish Succession (1733–35), the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), and the Seven Years' War (1756–63) garnered France little.

Rather, France lost most of its colonies abroad. The Diplomatic Revolution of 1756 in which France allied with her age-old enemy, Austria, was not popular. One observer echoed the opinion of many when he described this ill-fated alliance as "monstrous in principle and disastrous . . . in practice."¹² France was also ashamedly unable to help its traditional allies. She stood by helplessly while Poland was partitioned among Austria, Prussia, and Russia and while Russia seized Turkish territory, such as the Crimea. When the Prussians invaded the United Provinces in 1787, the French were also unable to come to their aid. These series of defeats eroded the respect France had formerly enjoyed in Europe. In the words of Joseph II of Austria, "France has collapsed and I doubt whether it will rise again."¹³ In addition many blamed the recession and unemployment in France on the Eden Treaty of 1786 in which the British and the French agreed to reduce the tariffs on certain goods. The reaction in France to these military disasters and diplomatic setbacks was "humiliation, anger, and disaffection."¹⁴

The disaffection of the army also played a role in the coming of the Revolution. The army, demoralized over recent losses, particularly in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, was furious with the king for his refusal to send French troops to aid their Dutch ally. The poor morale was so critical by 1789 that the king believed he could not rely on his own troops. He was told that the army would mutiny if ordered to fire on the Parisians.¹⁵ The army's loyalty was never tested on the field, but the large number of soldiers who were willing to sit in the Estates General (of the 278 deputies of the noble estate, 221 were officers, active or retired) and to speak out against abuses reflects their discontent.¹⁶

The only notable diplomatic and military success of the French in the eighteenth century was their assistance to the colonials in the war for American independence—support for which was not universal. Turgot, for example, had advised the king to remain neutral because of the precarious state of French finances. The financial aid to the Americans constituted more than twice the ordinary yearly revenue.¹⁷ The American Revolution also played another role in causing the French Revolution: the French saw that protest against arbitrary actions and unjust laws could succeed, that new societies could be established, that despotism could be resisted. The American example would prove a potent one (see document 2, "Mémoires of Weber").

Notes

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3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 7.
4. Quoted in Sydenham, *The French Revolution*, 24.
5. William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 195.
6. *Ibid.*, 43.
7. Schama, *Citizens*, 87.
8. Daniel Roche quoted in T. C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe 1660–1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 409.
9. Quoted in Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 49.
10. Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, 416.
11. Goethe quoted in *ibid.*, 141.
12. Quoted in Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars*, 23.
13. Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, 423.
14. Orville Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat of France and Public Opinion on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1783–1789* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 4.
15. Samuel Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution: The Role and Development of the Line Army, 1787–1793* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 60.
16. Blanning, *The Culture of Power*, 427.
17. Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789–1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 35.